Images du monde visionnaire. The representation of hallucinogenic vision in various ranges of color

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The Representation of Hallucinogenic Vision in Various Ranges of Color

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In the early 1960s, French filmmaker Éric Duvivier made a series of films on hallucinations. One of these films is called IMAGES DU MONDE VISIONNAIRE (*Pictures of a Visionary World*, FRA 1963). Duvivier made this film in collaboration with the Belgian French artist Henri Michaux. The film was based on Michaux's books *Misérable miracle* (1956), *L'infini turbulent* (1957), and *Connaissance par les gouffres* (1961),[1] in which he describes his experiences with hallucinogenic drugs. The film exists in different versions that show variations in image and color quality. What do these variations mean for the depiction of Michaux's visions?

In 1947, after three years of medical school, Éric Duvivier started making experimental and medical films. The interest in (experimental) filmmaking might very well have been instigated by his uncle Julien Duvivier, the well-known French avant-garde film director. Duvivier's films were not presented at public screenings but for specialized medical audiences at conferences and training sessions.[2] IMAGES DU MONDE VISIONNAIRE was made for this purpose as well. However, the film is not an average educational film of the kind one would expect in such a context. Although an introductory title explains the value of the film for "current research on the biochemical pathology of psychoses," it is much more an attempt at experimental filmmaking, trying to visually reproduce Michaux's experiences with mescaline and hashish.

→ Fig. 1

Color is a very important element in the film. At the beginning, for example, we see a closeup of a man who is sliding away into a mescaline frenzy. His face is covered subsequently in yellow and red light to illustrate his altered state of mind. This is a technique we also know from other films, such as Alfred Hitchcock's VERTIGO (USA 1958) and MARNIE (USA 1964). Moreover, the parts depicting Michaux's visions are also rich in color and inventive in their play with color changes. For example, a special technique involving moving lights makes colored glitter shaped like Michaux's drawings shimmer and shine. This technique, known as *héliophore*, was invented by Louis Dufay.[3] In 1964, it was adopted by Henri-Georges Clouzot, who used it on the face of Romy Schneider for his unfinished film L'ENFER (*Inferno*, FRA).[4] In Michaux's books, color also plays an important role. In *Misérable miracle*, he describes how he is drowned in thousands of small colored

→ Figs. I+II

Fig. I Close-up before the start of the mescaline hallucinations in IMAGES DU MONDE VISIONNAIRE (Éric Duvivier, FRA 1963). Kodachrome II camera film, 16 mm. Credit: Image'Est. Photo: Bregt Lameris

Fig. II Close-up with yellowy red light during the mescaline hallucinations in IMAGES DU MONDE VISIONNAIRE (Éric Duvivier, FRA 1963). Kodachrome II camera film, 16 mm. Credit: Image'Est. Photo: Bregt Lameris

dots that invade his mind,[5] and in *Connaissance par les gouffres* he explains how he experienced colors "that, brutally and vulgarly, compose ensembles that hit you, as if your visual cortex is being brutalized by invading poison."[6]

It is said that Michaux controlled everything, including the colors in the film during the making of it. Despite this, he was not happy with the final results. In the preamble to the film he states that the images were inadequate, and that they should be "more charged, more intensely beautiful, more atrociously colored."[7] His conclusion was that film was not the right medium to depict mescaline or hashish visions after all.

But film is not just "a medium." Every film is made within a particular context including a specific set of technological and material constraints. Éric Duvivier was a filmmaker in the semiprofessional field, which meant that he worked with 16 mm reversal film, because it was cheaper than 35 mm film and easier to handle. For IMAGES DU MONDE VISIONNAIRE, Duvivier used Kodachrome II 16 mm reversal film stock.

Kodachrome was brought to the market in 1935 as 16 mm amateur film stock balanced for daylight, followed by a Type A for tungsten (indoors) in 1936.[8] Although Kodachrome 16 mm was introduced as an amateur film format, soon after its introduction (semi) professionals started using it as well. In contrast to Technicolor, which needed a large beam-split camera with three strips of 35 mm negative,[9] Kodachrome could be used in any standard 16 mm camera. This opened up possibilities for nonfiction, industrial, and educational filmmakers. However, Kodachrome is a reversal stock, which means that the film is directly developed into a positive image, ready for projection. As a result, Kodachrome films only existed in single prints, initially not intended for duplication. For amateurs this was not a problem. However, it proved very inconvenient for more professional filmmakers.

To solve this problem, in 1938 Eastman Kodak introduced a reversal duplicating technique and a Kodachrome duplicating stock. This allowed filmmakers to also use Kodachrome for films that were to be distributed on more than one print. Over the following years, several camera film stocks were created specifically for duplication, among them Kodachrome Duplicating Film (1940), Kodachrome Commercial Film (1946), and Ektachrome Commercial (1958). These materials mostly had soft emulsions and a low-contrast image. This prevented an increase of contrast during duplication but also made them unsuitable for projection.

In 1961, Eastman Kodak finally presented a new version of its amateur film stock: Kodachrome II. The trade press judged the new film stock much better than "regular" Kodachrome. It was sharper, softer in contrast, the colors were of better quality, and the shadows had more detail. As had happened in 1935 with the introduction of Kodachrome, the new amateur stock was soon hijacked by the semiprofessional field. Filmmakers substituted the earlier Kodachrome or Ektachrome they had been using with the new Kodachrome II. This implied that, against the advice of Kodak, they were duplicating Kodachrome II material to produce projection prints.

Christian Bonah from the University of Strasbourg has been working on the Duvivier films for many years. After Éric Duvivier died in 2018, he took responsibility for the film prints at the archives of Image'Est in Nancy. He kindly allowed us to borrow some of the prints of IMAGES DU MONDE VISIONNAIRE for our research as part of the project ERC Advanced Grant *FilmColors* at the University of Zurich. This enabled us to compare the different materials and learn more about the types of material Duvivier used for his distribution prints.

The investigation of the prints showed that IMAGES DU MONDE VISIONNAIRE was indeed filmed on Kodachrome II camera material and distributed on Eastman Reversal Color Print film. In addition, we found a distribution print from 1984, made on an Agfa-Gevaert reversal film material called Gevachrome. The differences between the three types of materials turned out to be quite interesting. First of all, the Kodachrome II material has amazingly balanced and saturated colors and an impressive sharpness of image. The duplicates made on Eastman material, however, show a decrease in sharpness as well as a loss of clear detail in the darker parts of the images. But, most importantly, the duplicate shows an increase in green tones, resulting in a greenish image and desaturated reds.

→ Figs. 2+3

The Gevachrome print has other problems. The latitude of this material is broader than that of the Kodak material, revealing much more detail in the blacks. However, the print is overall much lighter. As a result, the blacks are blueish, and the other colors get a brighter, and therefore flatter look. Moreover, the colors are pushed toward red, taking out the blue and moving the whites far more toward yellow. This causes an important shift in color balance, as is particularly evident in some of the shimmering images. Comparing two such images, we can see that the whites are much more of a soft yellow instead of a bright white, which makes the shimmering, caused by the reflection of the white light on the glitter, less intense. Finally, the 1984 print also shows less depth in the images, especially again in the shimmering parts, where the materiality of the glitter is much more visible in the Kodachrome and the Eastman Reversal Color Print film than in the Gevachrome variant. This might be the result of the print being slightly overexposed.

→ Figs. 4+5

→ Fig. 6

Interestingly, a VHS was based on this Gevachrome print, which was then digitized and made accessible online. Besides the fact that VHS shows very little of the detail of an analogue print, the use of the 1984 print rather than the camera stock as starting material also influenced the final appearance of the film. The result is appalling: the colors are plainly different, the details are gone. When taking into account that it was probably this version that was used to study and judge the film over the past decades, it should not surprise us that people did not appreciate it and decided it was a failure.[10]

In all, over the decades, the appearance of IMAGES DU MONDE VISIONNAIRE on the screen has turned out very differently from the camera material that was so frantically controlled by the poet Michaux. Hypothetically, it might not have been what Michaux experienced and wished to recreate in the film. The remaining question is: Do we wish to bring back images that were controlled by Michaux, or do we wish to recreate what audiences from the 1960s onward saw on various projection screens?

1. Henri Michaux, *Misérable miracle*, Paris: Gallimard, 1956; *L'infini turbulent*, Paris: Mercure de France, 1957; *Connaissance par les gouffres*, Paris: Le point du jour, 1961.
2. Christian Bonah, "Business and Art: Pharmaceutical Industries, Film Production and Circulation, and the French Film Production Company Science Film, 1960–1980," in *Films That Work Harder: The Global Circulations of Industrial Cinema*, ed. Vinzenz Hediger, Florian Hoof, Yvonne Zimmermann, and Anthony Scott, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019 (forthcoming).
3. Anne Dymek and Vincent Lowy, "Toucher aux limites du filmique: *Images du monde visionnaire* (1963)," in *Cahier Louis-Lumière* 11 (2018), 65–75, here: 68.
4. Ibid., 68.
5. Michaux, *Misérable miracle* (see n. 1), 27
6. Michaux, *Connaissance par les gouffres* (see n. 1), 11 [translated]
7. Dymek and Lowy, "Toucher aux limites du filmique" (see n. 3), 66.
8. Norris Pope, "Kodachrome and the Rise of 16mm Professional Film Production in America, 1938–1950," in *Film History: An International Journal* 28, no. 4 (2016), 58–99.
9. See Michelle Beutler's essay in this volume "Standardizing Color Film: Technicolor No. IV and Agfacolor during the 1940s," 197–209.
10. Dymek and Lowy, "Toucher aux limites du filmique" (see n. 3), 67.

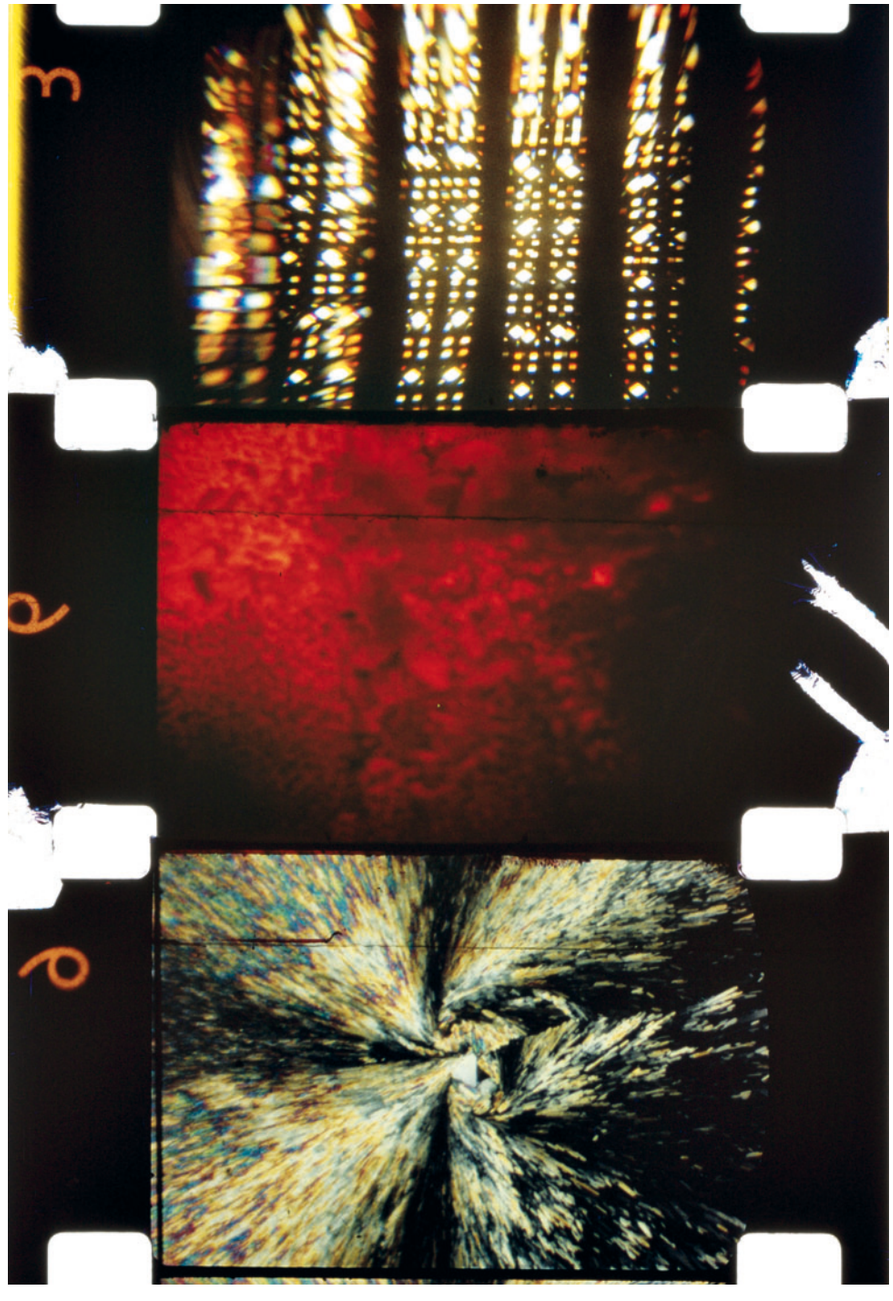
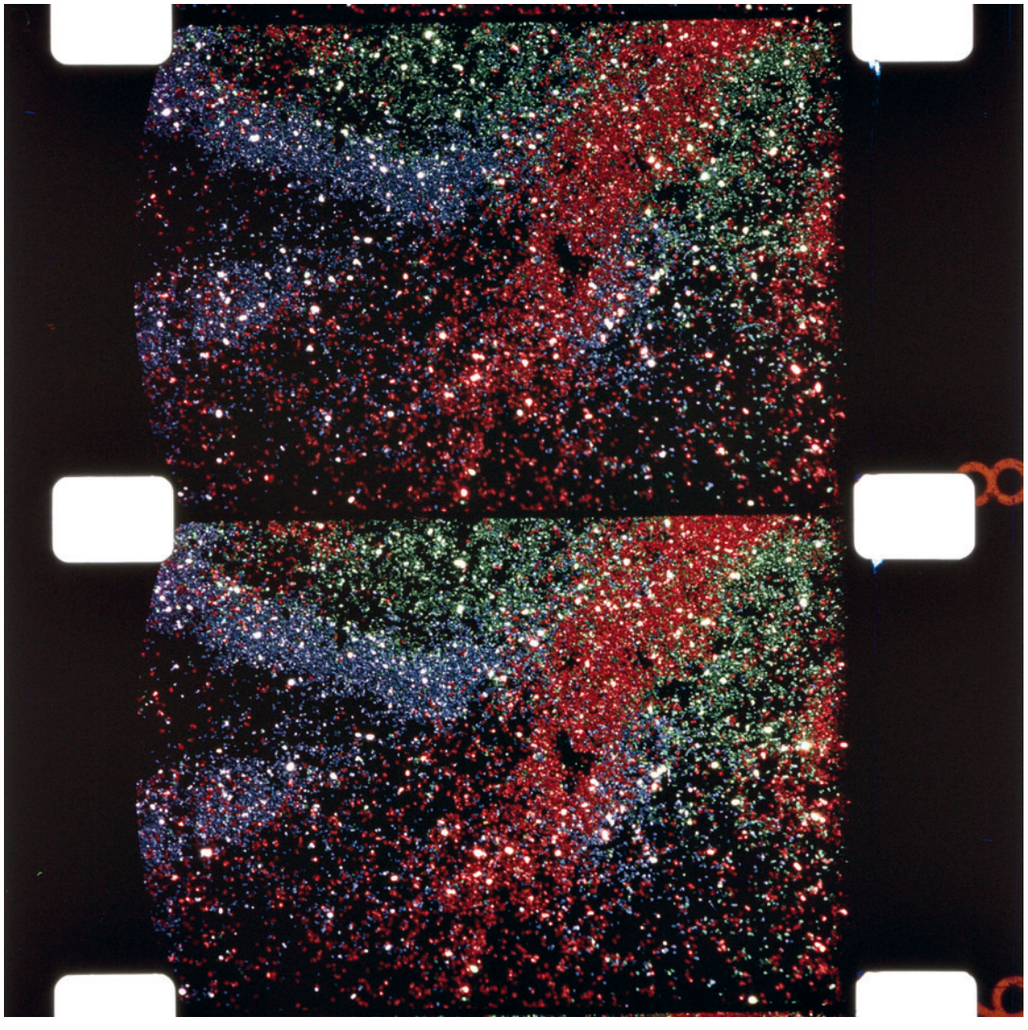


Fig. 1 Educational film with experimental characteristics: IMAGES DU MONDE VISIONNAIRE (Éric Duvivier, FRA 1963). Kodachrome II camera film, 16 mm. Credit: Image'Est. Photo: Bregt Lameris



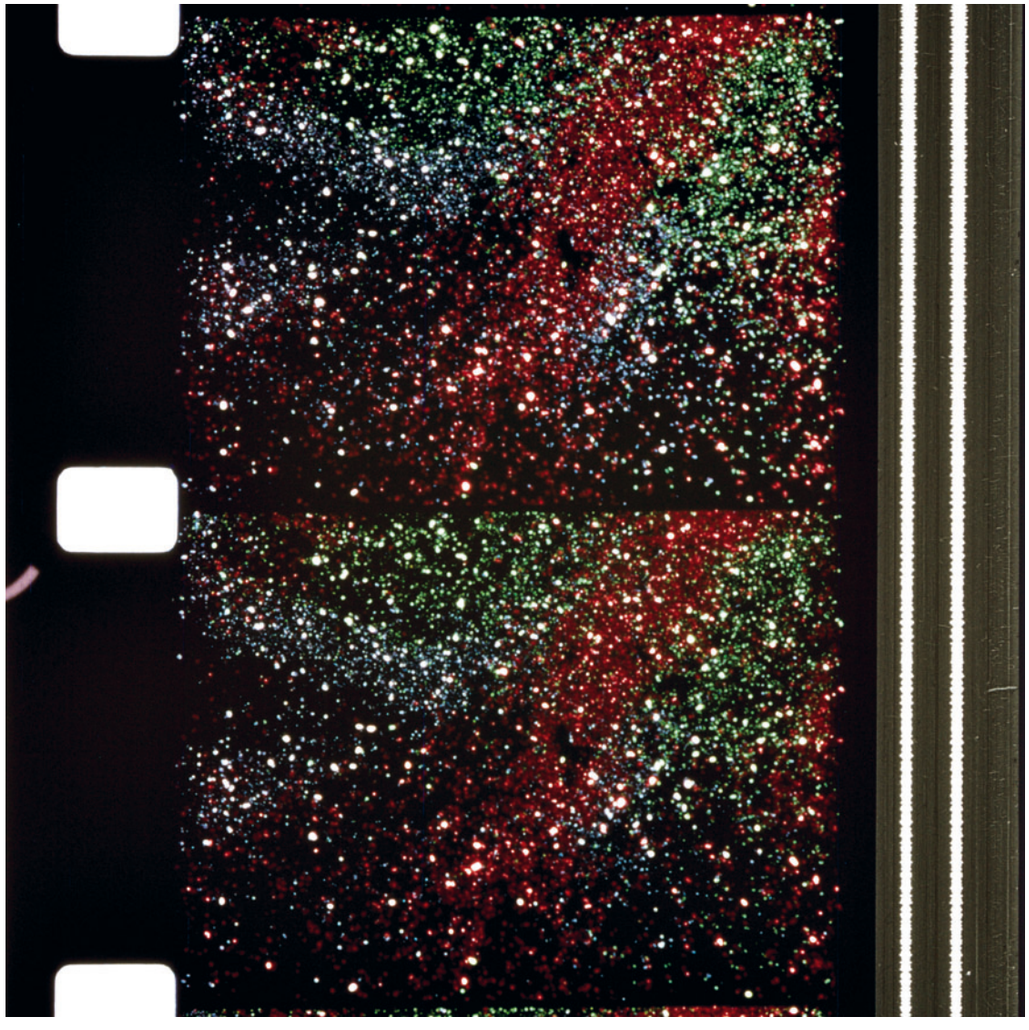
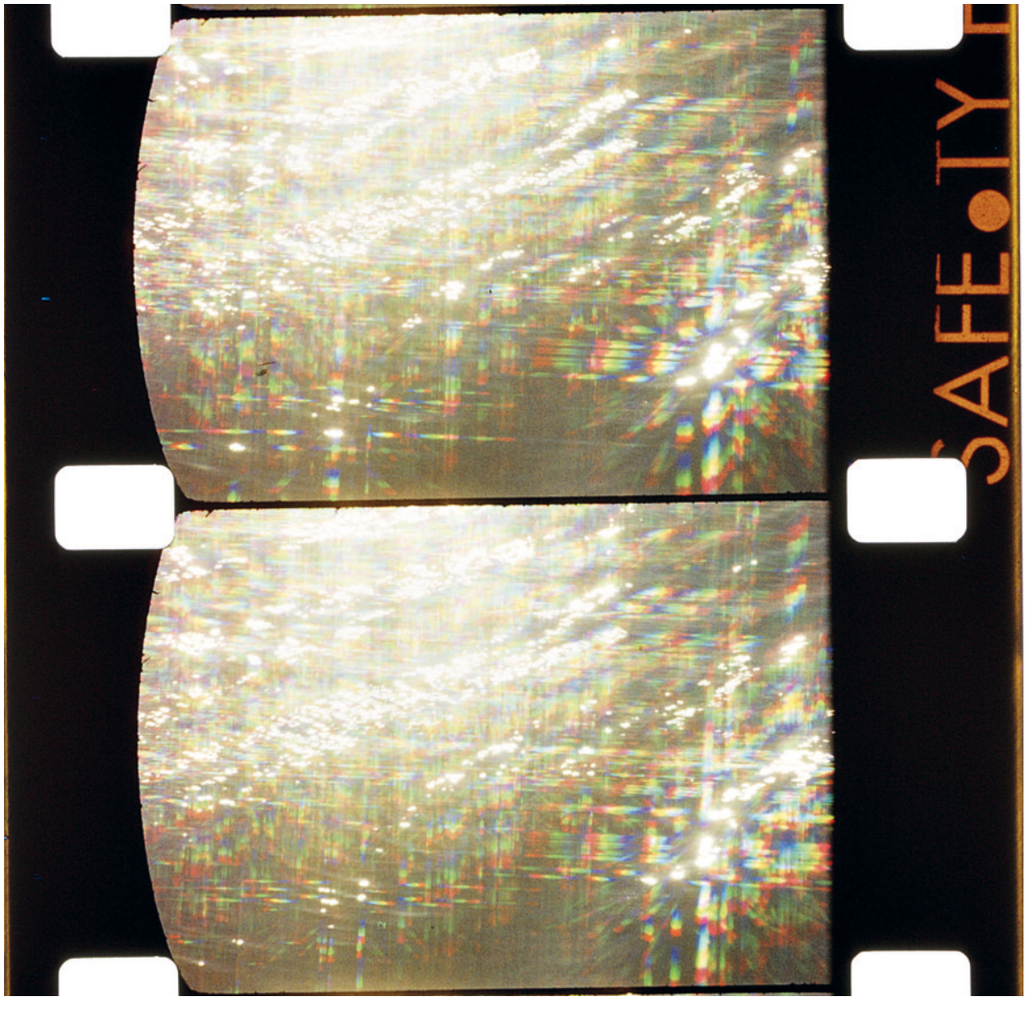


Fig. 2 Saturated colors and sharpness of image of the Kodachrome camera material from IMAGES DU MONDE VISIONNAIRE (Éric Duvivier, FRA 1963). Kodachrome II camera film, 16 mm. Credit: Image'Est. Photo: Bregt Lameris

Fig. 3 Reduced sharpness, loss of detail and greenish coloring of the Eastman copy of IMAGES DU MONDE VISIONNAIRE (Éric Duvivier, FRA 1963). Eastman Reversal Color Print Film, 16 mm. Credit: Image'Est. Photo: Bregt Lameris



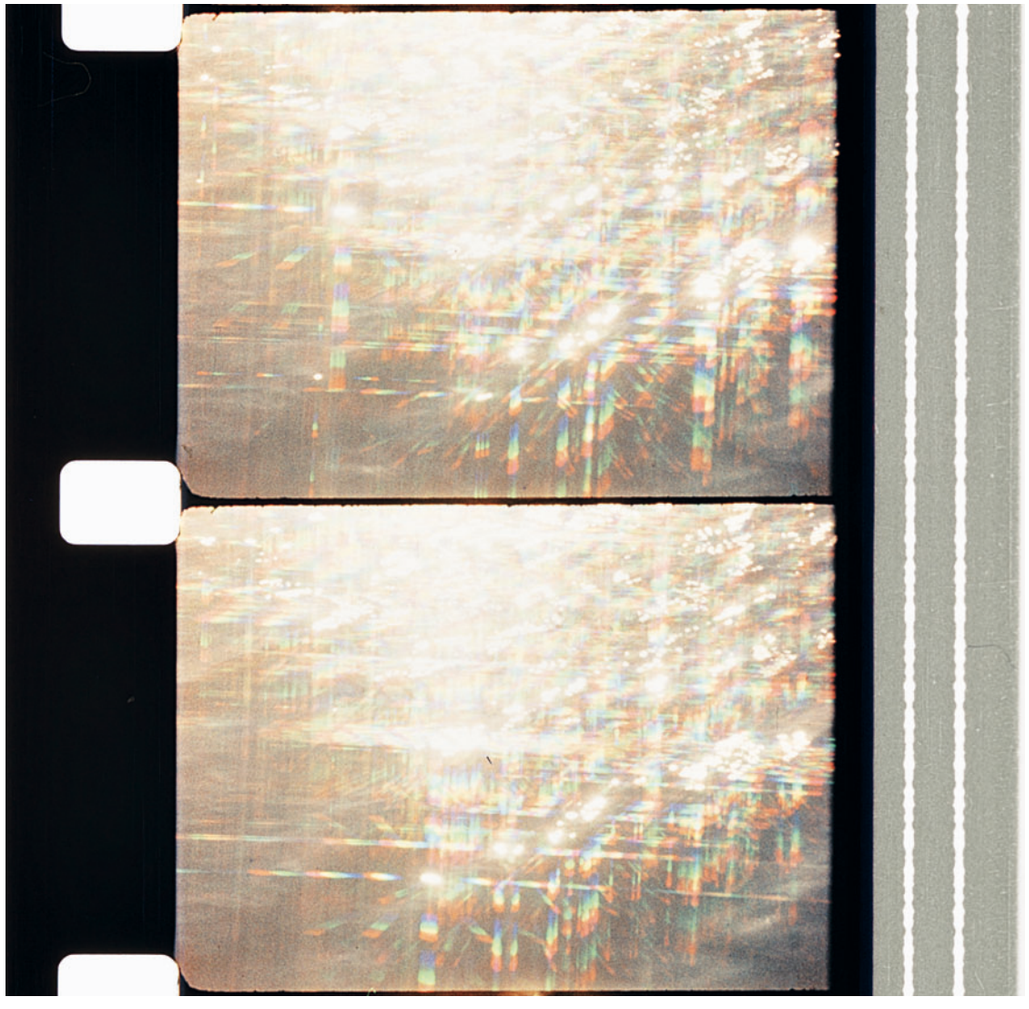


Fig. 4 Intense shimmer and shades of white in the Kodachrome camera material of IMAGES DU MONDE VISIONNAIRE (Éric Duvivier, FRA 1963). Kodachrome II camera film, 16 mm. Credit: Image'Est. Photo: Bregt Lameris

Fig. 5 Shifted color balance, yellow shades of white and reduced shimmer in the Gevachrome copy of IMAGES DU MONDE VISIONNAIRE (Éric Duvivier, FRA 1963). Gevachrome, reversal film, 16 mm. Credit: Image'Est. Photo: Bregt Lameris

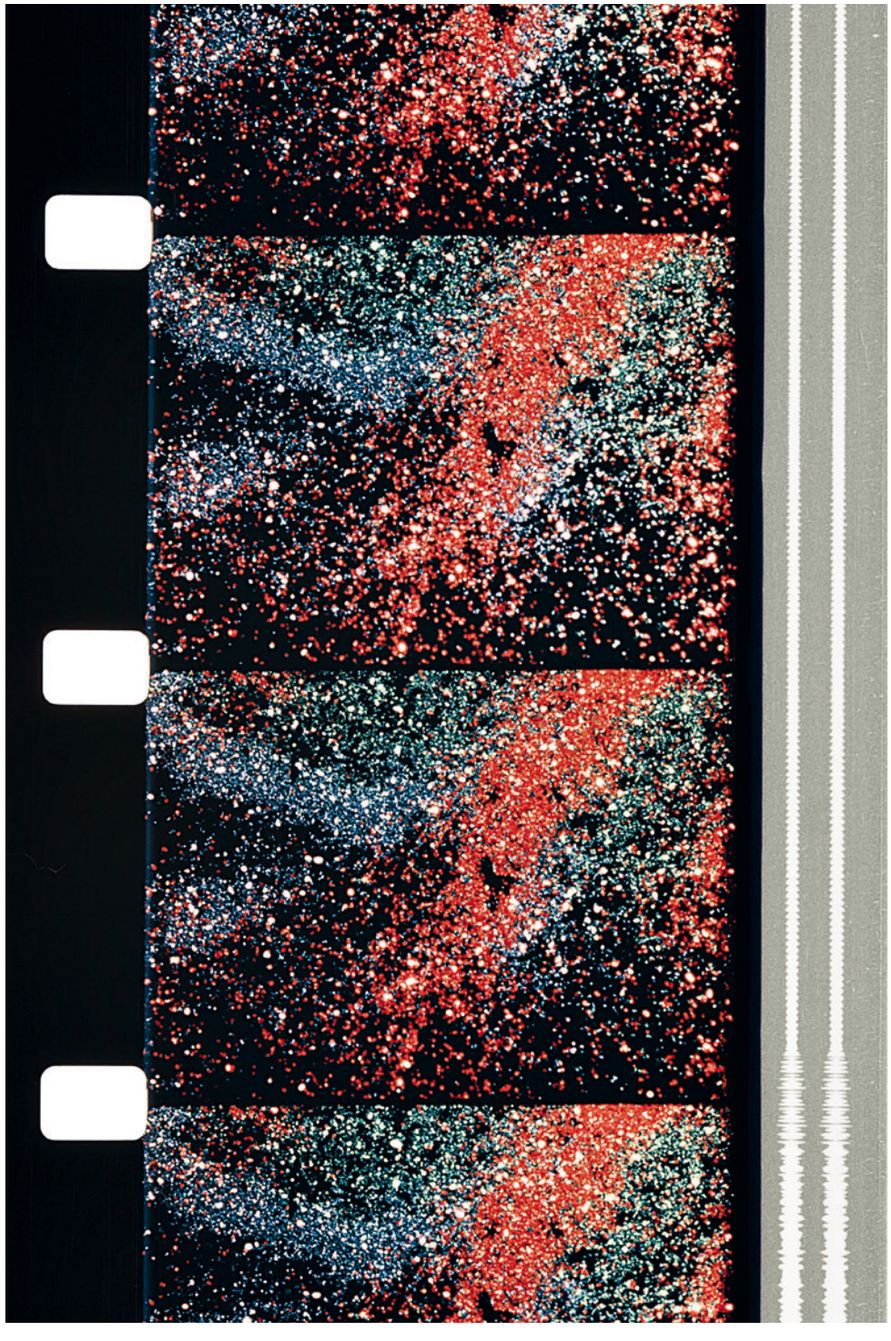


Fig. 6 Poor image depth in the Gevachrome copy of IMAGES DU MONDE VISIONNAIRE (Éric Duvivier, FRA 1963). Gevachrome, reversal film, 16 mm. Credit: Image'Est. Photo: Bregt Lameris